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'Military Balance' Authors

Strategic Studies Institute Keeps Making an Impact

By WILLIAM TUOHY, *Times Staff Writer*

LONDON—It is dangerous to assume, as some Americans do, that in the arms race the West "can spend the Soviets into collapse."

The Soviets "may be able to tighten their belts and bear a higher level of sacrifice . . . than certain Western countries."

Thus arms control is "more important than ever," and in the long term there will be "substantial reductions . . . in the arsenals of both major and minor powers."

These are the views of Robert O'Neill, director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and when O'Neill speaks out, his observations are studied carefully by strategic thinkers in the East as well as in the West, by hawks as well as doves.

Annual Publication

The occasion for O'Neill's most recent remarks was a press conference not long ago to mark the annual issue of the institute's authoritative publication called "The Military Balance." The scene was the institute's offices in the Covent Garden district of London, Spartan in appearance and seemingly out of place among the smart boutiques, bistros and theaters.

Outside on the street, actors, dancers and shoppers were bustling past; inside, researchers pondered such formidable questions as nuclear deterrence, arms control, regional conflict. They think about the unthinkable.

Every year, the institute publishes a dozen heavy-weight essays on international security matters, such as the influential paper prepared by researcher Desmond Ball, who argues that nuclear war, once started, will have very little chance of being controlled.

And the institute sponsors an annual conference attended by strategists from around the world. Out of it comes such summaries as "America's Security in the 1980s."

Assessment of Armed Forces

But the institute's best known publication is "The Military Balance," an assessment of the armed forces of almost every country. It has become a virtually indispensable handbook for military attaches and foreign correspondents.

O'Neill calls it "an annual quantitative assessment of the military power and defense expenditure of countries throughout the world."

O'Neill, tall and graying at 47, is an Australian and a specialist in international relations. He said in a recent interview that in preparing the annual assessment "the cooperation of governments has been sought and in many cases received, but the director and staff assume full responsibility for the facts and judgments which the study contains."

"It takes a lot of time to produce," he added.

Issue Attacked by Critics

From time to time, "The Military Balance" has been attacked by critics. The current issue, for example, says that the advantage in high technology the West has over the East is being eroded and that the "numerical balance over the last 20 years has slowly but steadily moved in favor of the East."

Such conclusions have been challenged by strategic thinkers like Rear Adm. Gene Laroque of the Center for Defense Information in Washington, who has criticized as excessive the level of the U.S. defense budget.

People on the other side of the question also find reason to raise objections, for the publication goes on to say, in the same issue: "Our conclusion remains that the overall balance continues to be such as to make military aggression a highly risky undertaking."

But there is praise as well. Prof. Lawrence Freedman of Kings College in London, a specialist in strategic studies, commented:

'It's Not Always Accurate'

"The institute is the best thing going. It's not always accurate, but nobody is in this business. It's the best stuff available in the public domain, but I have to admit I'm an interested party, because I used to be a research associate of the institute and I am still a member. Their annual conference is like a political convention of strategic studies experts. There is nothing better."

Aside from its conclusions, the publication takes note of important military developments and provides periodically a country-by-country assessment of military power.

On Iran, for example, it offers the following: "Population 14,300,000; military service, basic 21-24 months, extended for war; total armed forces, 507,250, mostly conscripts." There is similar data on Iraq, which is presently at war with Iran, and there are details on order of battle, from corps to brigade level, even militia forces, and concise details on air strength.

The Israeli entry says in part: "Population, 4,100,000; military service, men, 39 months, women, 24 months (Jews and Druze only; Christians may volunteer); annual training for reservists thereafter up to age 54 for men, 34 (or marriage) for women. Total armed forces: 172,000 (120,300 conscripts) with mobilization to 500,000, of which 100,000 can report in about 24 hours."

It lists Israel's gross national product, estimated defense expenditures and inflation rate, and says of Israel's invasion of Lebanon: "The total war cost is: . . . \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion, but high inflation rates and continued occupation costs make defense expenditure estimates highly unreliable."

The Israeli section takes up almost a full page and lists every known unit in the army, navy and air force, together with its equipment.

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